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TALES FROM LONG ISLAND

An interview with low-budget gore guru Nathan Schiff by Paul J. Brown

If you were a part of the underground film network in the 80s and early 90s then the chances are that you will have heard of Nathan Schiff, and if you were lucky you knew someone that could get you a nth generation copy of one or all of his films. Nathan Schiff's movies have always been notoriously hard to get hold of as they never ever had an official video release! His quartet of horror, **WEASELS RIP MY FLESH** (1979), **THE LONG ISLAND CANNIBAL MASSACRE** (1980), **THEY DON'T CUT THE GRASS ANYMORE** (1985) and **VERMILION EYES** (1990), were zero-budget self-produced pictures that were shot on Super 8 film. As well as being notoriously gory, his films have that extra something that raise them way above many of the shot-on-video piles of dreck that masquerade as entertainment today. Nathan Schiff's films display a raw talent and if you delve beneath the whirring camera noises, the jumpy editing and sound, there's a film-maker who showed some of the big boys how it should be done.
Incredibly, after all this time, three of Nathan's films are finally now available for the DVD buying public. It's good to talk as they say, so I caught up with the man and found out what makes him tick...

*PJB: **WEASELS RIP MY FLESH** was your first full-length film, how many short movies had you completed prior to this and were they all in the horror/exploitation genre?*

NS: Seventeen shorts. They were from all genres. Horror, science fiction, historical, adventure, comedy, satire, surrealism and animation. Never did a western or a musical, though! I'm what one might call a true cinephile!

How old were you at this time?

I shot my first short at age eleven. I began **WEASELS RIP MY FLESH** at sixteen. A child before the great corruption!

*Was **WEASELS** an expanded version of a short film?*

No, it was intended to be feature length from the word go.

Did you come up with the creature design yourself?

I came up with every effect and design you see in every film I've made. On the features, I would love to have had the expertise of a make-up artist or creature designer, but I was given the task of doing it all. As a kid, I loved doing everything. Today, I wouldn't dare to even consider it.

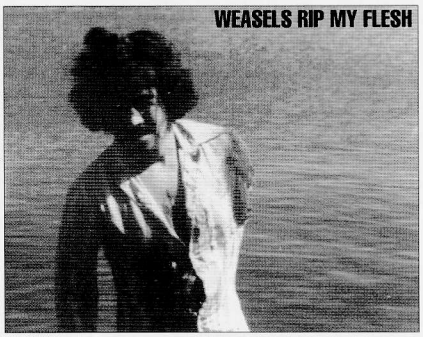
Was this the first time you had worked with actors Fred Borges and John Smihula?

Yes, we were high-school buddies.

*What was the total budget for **WEASELS** and was it funded by yourself?*

$400 all in! Instead of a bicycle or a stereo, I got a movie to make!

Did you rig up the pulping of Fred Borges' head on your own?



Yes, indeed. I hollowed out an egg, filled it with fake blood and taped it to his forehead. John, who was inside the costume bashed his head against the sheet rock wall for real! That big bump you hear was Fred's skull connecting with the wall!

How much of the big weasel was actually constructed and what was it made of?

I actually built two front half-sized Weasel props that were quite large. One had arms attached, the other had a mechanical mouth that could open and close at will. The one with the arms was so cumbersome and unwieldy I could only use it for one or two shots. It was impossible to manipulate the arms and jaw. The second was more agile, but looked more like a big brown shark than any rodent to speak of. They both had a chicken wire frame which was covered in tin-foil and paper-mache, then completely covered in sheets of medical cotton and spray-painted brown. The teeth were cardboard and the eyes were, believe it or not, chocolate covered marshmallows! They both had whiskers but the tiniest wisp of wind would cause them to fall off. This Weasel did not come from the Stan Winston Studio!

What made you bring the shark into that incredible blood-squib-fest at the end?

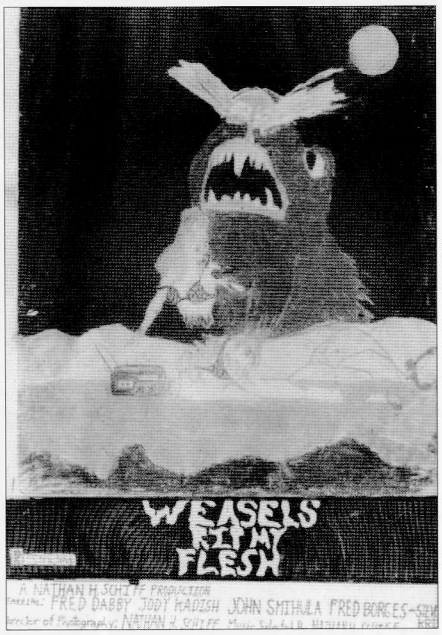
That, I always say, was an act of God! On the final day's shooting, I was figuring on how to conclude this on a bizarre note. Then, before us the answer lay, staring out of a garbage can! It was a plastic Mako shark with real razor sharp shark teeth in its mouth. I said; "That's it! There's our denouement!" So we rescued the poor fellow and he became, unwittingly to be sure, a part of history. Those teeth incidentally really ripped Fred Borges' flesh! Beware the wrath of what may appear lifeless!

*Who actually saw **WEASELS** when you first completed it and how did you get it to your public?*

At first, it was just screened for friends, and I thought that would be the end of it. Then I managed to get it shown in high school, where it was a sensation. Students would cut class to see it, and it had write ups in major newspapers who came down to see it. I wasn't expecting anything, and suddenly this explosion of interest.

*For the follow-up you made the brilliantly titled **LONG ISLAND CANNIBAL MASSACRE** - was it easy to get your two male leads together again for it?*

We immediately began planning our next assault on mankind right after graduation! This time, it was going to be a far more elaborate affair. I had learned much from **WEASELS** and vowed the next one would not be bound by outrageous special effects which my budget couldn't possibly hope to realise. So that meant no more monsters.



Original hand-drawn poster by Nathan Schiff

The dialogue between the cop Cameron and his boss was great - did this require a lot of work on your part and many takes at all?

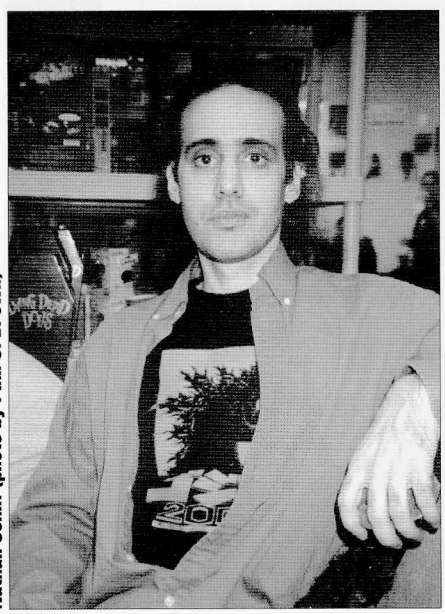
It's funny you should ask, because I was disappointed with this scene. Why? Because I hadn't any idea the Chief was going to be so fine in his line delivery. Had I known beforehand, I would have rewritten the scene with emphasis on his dialogue. It plays well anyhow. And it was shot one to one! It was a very easy shoot.

*The use of the lawnmower as a weapon was pretty inspired - do you suppose that Frank Henenlotter and Peter Jackson had seen it before the likes of **FRANKENHOOKER** and **BRAINDEAD**?*

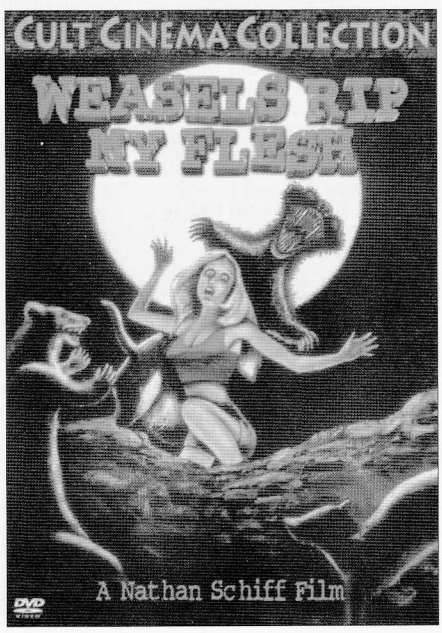
I couldn't say. If so, I'm content in knowing I pioneered the use of a lawnmower as a weapon of murder!

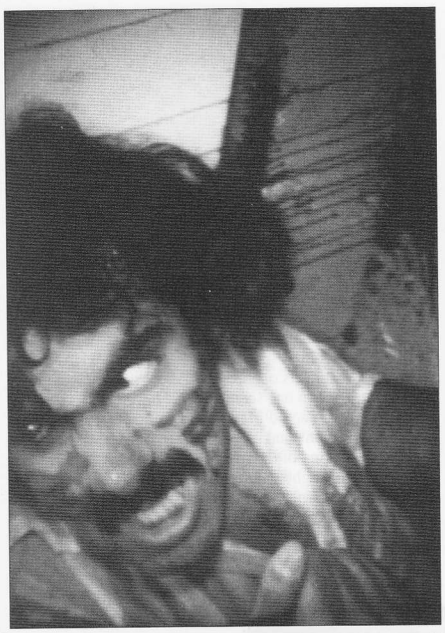
What was the decomposing head made from?

That was a plastic skull which I sculpted flesh around using modeling clay, fleshtone make-up for color, a plastic eye and a damn expensive wig! We used real blood in that



Nathan Schiff (photo by Paul J. Brown)





2 shots from WEASELS RIP MY FLESH

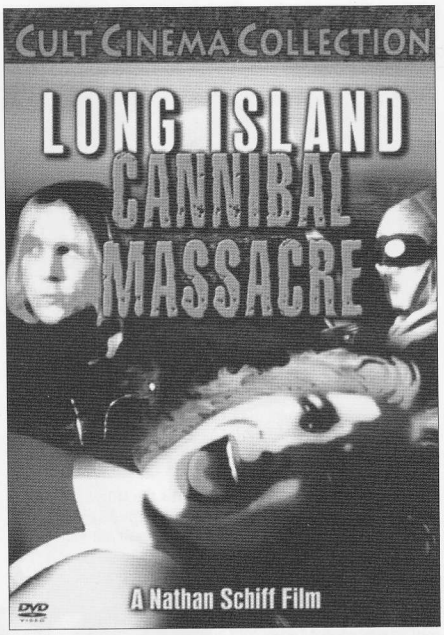
shot. They sold cows blood at the butcher shop, so I thought why mix my own blood if they sell real blood? I paid for this decision as the blood had spoiled, turned purple and stunk like a charnel house! I nearly passed out.

The hallucination sequence was well-staged - can you explain how the breeze-block in the head was filmed?

Well, it wasn't intended to be a hallucination. It was something Jack had seen, or was told to by his father. He was envisioning something that had actually occurred. So we stuffed some clothing, minus the head, and smashed a honeydew which was saturated in fake blood, cotton and chunks of tasty fruit.

***LONG ISLAND CANNIBAL MASSACRE** features the line, "Zedd is dead", any thoughts that the notoriously resourceful Mr. Tarantino possibly liked that particular line of dialogue?*

2 shots from LONG ISLAND CANNIBAL MASSACRE



Well, we all watch untold numbers of low-budget exploitation films, be it Tarantino, David Lynch or Tim Burton. Even Stanley Kubrick was an avid watcher of cheap exploitation movies! So I wouldn't know if he took that name from my film, though it's certainly possible.

The final chainsaw dismemberment scene is jaw-dropping stuff, even by today's standards - how long did that take to shoot and was that look of terror on Fred Borges' face real!?

I spent more time on that particular effect than on any other. It took four days to complete because there were so many setups and so much material that had to be utilized. We had to wait until the end of each day for the light to match correctly. So we only had a few hours to shoot on a given day. It was both physically and emotionally exhausting. Fred claims he wasn't afraid.

How easy was it to get Fred to put that offal in his mouth?

Ha! I practically had to shove that cow's tongue into his mouth! He refused at first, but I finally shoved the tongue and meat & blood all into Fred's mouth. He almost threw up before the camera rolled. And I had sewn loose chicken skin onto the back of the tongue, so that went in Fred's mouth too. We didn't have Mad Cow Disease or Salmonella in those days. Everybody came out of it healthy and chipper!

Please explain the look of the cannibal man?

That's a funny story. He was conceived as and designed to be a Vietnam war casualty because of chemical weapons. Notice he is wearing army fatigues and appears totally mutated. Somebody convinced me it was in bad taste to have the father be a Vietnam casualty, and I foolishly dropped the idea and made him a leper. But the costume and mask had already declared otherwise!

Did you 'market' **LONG ISLAND CANNIBAL MASSACRE** in the same way as **WEASELS**?

We played it in libraries and college universities, but it began to gain true notoriety when it played in clubs in Manhattan.

*Next up for you was the gory black comedy **THEY DON'T CUT THE GRASS ANYMORE** - were you making a statement here with this film, or was it just a splat-fest in the **BAD TASTE** way?*

It was originally conceived as a social commentary during that period in time, but we had very little time to shoot the film as John Smihula was entering the peace corps. So a very elaborate and satiric idea went out the window in favor of hard-core violence. We shot that in five days. It still retained its social commentary, which today has never been more relevant, I think. Budget and time restrictions were the tightest ever on that one.

*Was it your **DAWN OF THE DEAD**, an attack on the yuppie generation?*

Absolutely. Though **DAWN OF THE DEAD** was more a parable on consumerism. **THEY DON'T CUT THE GRASS ANYMORE** addressed class warfare and

ROBERT MARCUCCI on THE FILMS OF NATHAN SCHIFF

Robert Marcucci is a filmmaker/designer currently residing in New York City. One of his most notorious feats was that of production designer for the cult favourite, **STREET TRASH**. Recently he has executive produced the restoration and DVD presentation of **LONG ISLAND CANNIBAL MASSACRE**, **WEASELS RIP MY FLESH** and **THEY DON'T CUT THE GRASS ANYMORE**. Marcucci has also directed documentary footage for Dario Argento at work on his film, **TWO EVIL EYES**, and works with Luigi Cozzi and Argento with their fantasy shop, Profondo Rosso. Marcucci writes reviews and production notes for websites and DVDs, most recently for the site, dvdmaniacs.net, and the DVDs **WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO SOLANGE?** and **THEY CALL HER ONE EYE**. Marcucci is currently looking into producing other films.

I was introduced to Nathan Schiff in 1997 through a mutual friend, Steven Oddo. We became instant friends who shared the same interests in collecting everything that pertained to cinema, particularly horror, fantasy and exploitation. From this point on, we have had a typical close friendship, where you have some of the best and worst times together. The love of cinema is the elixir that has kept us friends during those worst times especially, to this day.

Nathan certainly talks the talk when it comes to films and filmmaking. Anyone who knows him will vouch for his tireless discussions on genres, production values, film history, and of course his amazing intuition when it came to analysis and theory. (He can also speak volumes when it comes to almost any other subject). He is also quite mad, by the way; that genius insanity that can be both alarming and entertaining, just like his films, which have proven that Nathan's walk has a lot more step than most filmmakers of his favourite genres.

Nathan showed me **LONG ISLAND CANNIBAL MASSACRE**, **THEY DON'T CUT THE GRASS ANYMORE**, and **WEASELS RIP MY FLESH** a short time after we met, along with his myriad short films, all of which astounded me, not only for their ingenuity and creativity, but also for the enormous amount of work amassed at such an early age in his life. I was so entertained that I started turning friends on to them at any given chance. People loved them. They are exploitative: often exhausting during their more violent moments to the point where you are beyond any objection towards it - the kind of comic book bloodletting so indicative of the golden days of the finest exploitation cinema. Nathan's films really are the tail end of that era, than they are an homage or tribute. They are celluloid time capsules of pop culture, with Long Island as its central locale. You can't help but marvel at the hairstyles, jeans, and home décor, or to be lulled by the omnipresent Long Island accent, that has unintentionally made these films even more charming and entertaining. These films have always been magical and charming, albeit horrific at times, but nevertheless endearing and entertaining, which is Nathan Schiff.

As time went on, I decided that it I should try to do something with Nathan's films, so that's when I contacted friends in the biz such as Eddie Samuelson (writer, creator of dvdmaniacs.net) and Nathanial Thompson (author, creator of mondodigital.com and producer for Image Entertainment), after which I suggested to Nathan the films be propositioned to Image for DVD home video distribution. I made the deal, and thought that was it for me, but I just kept on following through with each aspect of the project, and before I realised it, became the central force behinds the films' second life. It was my network and producing skills that kept this project in motion. This turned out to be quite fun, because I love these films. I believe they stand on their own as entertainment, and are worthy of distribution - I am proud to be an integral part in bringing them to mainstream audiences. Thank Heaven for Nathanial, Eddie, Alan Bazin and all my other friends for making this venture a rather smooth ride.

Alan Bazin (Chief Editor, Digital Shark Edit Studio) is a great talent who toiled over the films with such zeal and determination astounding both Nathan and myself. He, along with Doug Thomas (Pro 8 Lab Colourist and transfer supervisor for the films) gave Nathan's films the royal treatment in restoration, resurrecting them for their second coming into the 21st century. In order to use the best pix and sound elements possible all three films had to be re-synchronised and re-edited. Alan's skills helped completely change **WEASELS** from an 18 frame per second film into one of 24 frames, where no one thought it could be done, given the circumstances of the elements and technology available to us. See, Alan had to match the soundtrack with the new image speed, which took *many* hours of editing, along with much patience and technical prowess. Alan obliterated choppy splices, uneven cuts and other imperfections originally left alone due to the nature of the Super 8 elements. He helped in recreating sound design, and other aesthetical editorial choices, giving the films such beautiful brush strokes beyond our expectations.

PRO 8 LAB in LA was the premier lab for the transfer. Doug Thomas, the colourist and supervisor, also took an immediate liking to Nathan's films, and worked overtime, colour correcting scene by scene, and making sure the films received the best treatment. The films even look 16mm and

35mm at times as a result of his work. Fellow employees and staff were constantly behind his back watching Nathan's films during each run. Doug at times nearly jeopardised his job working on these films, but it was worth it to him to give them the best work he could. I hope I work with more people like Doug on future projects.
Extras were of the essence, so I asked Scooter McCrae (**SHATTER DEAD**) to conduct and direct audio commentaries, and Howard Berger (**ORIGINAL SIN**), and T.J.Vittore to direct and shoot the video interviews with Nathan. All of these professional artists did a wonderful job - much better in my opinion than most other DVDs, especially when you take in consideration the low budget and the difficulty finding time to schedule sessions. These guys are all awesome in my book. Nathan supplied all of his deleted scenes, makeshift trailers, poster and still archives. (No small feat in itself, considering the small clippings of Super 8 film buried for years in his home - as with many filmmakers, who would have known that such elements would be sought after for exhibition in home video.) He even seized the moment to reinstate a scene or so in some of the films.
What also makes Nathan's films unique and historical with their DVD, home video world debut, is the fact that they are the first Super 8 mm feature length films ever to be so vastly produced and marketed in this format; the first to be given such aesthetic attention for the best possible presentation. To play a central role in this is fantastic to me. I hope others recognise this aspect and the work everyone put into them. I hope they see Nathan's artistry and talent, so obvious at such an early age when these films were conceived. I regret that his fourth feature, **VERMILION EYES**, was ultimately turned down for distribution. It is Nathan's most mature film, technically, and has an interesting fusion of surrealism and horror film narrative - it is also his most notorious, with its visual starkness. We did the same treatment for this film as well, and I'm confident there will be bids on it after his other films are released.

Robert Marcucci
(giallo.flick@verizon.net)

ALAN BAZIN on THE FILMS OF NATHAN SCHIFF

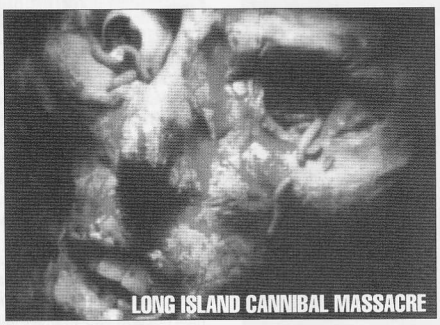
When we finally gathered all the elements from Nathan's films together and I saw what we had to work with, I thought back to the day years ago when I saw the Elite laserdisc of **NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD** I remembered what an impact the opening moments had on me, where they ran a few moments from one of those crappy, washed out prints we'd all seen for years and then it explodes, followed by a beautiful, restored version. It gave me the chills because I was watching a film I loved, and I knew that some people out there had gone through a lot of time and trouble to show that they loved it too by treating the film with reverence, and the fans that loved it with respect. Since both Robert Marcucci, the producer of the DVD releases, and I are both true blue fans of rare and original horror cinema, we talked about how we wanted to treat the release of Nathan's films in the same way, if we could. I half-jokingly said that it would be great if we could somehow pull off making these the "no-budget THX digital restorations" of Nathan's work. Knowing that we had practically no money, tons of rather unprofessional no budget film and audio elements to work with, an enormous amount of sound replacement to do and only a few weeks to complete everything and deliver the masters to Image, this was a ludicrous idea. But it became our underlying philosophy and we committed to doing whatever we could to give these films a royal treatment.
With regard to how Nathan's films were prepared for this DVD release, the sole shining new element I had to start with was a terrific new Film to Tape transfer Nathan and Robert had done at Super-8 out on the West Coast. But because there are no negatives for any of Nathan's films (being Super 8), only the original, spliced prints he used to carry around and project himself at places like the Dive in NY, this presented two new problems. First, as every splice passed through the film to tape transfer machine, the image jumped, lost registration, changed colour or sharpness, or had some tape artefacts visible for a few frames, resulting in a jarring distraction with each cut. So the first thing I decided to do was fix every edit point by extracting as few frames as I could to create a smooth cut. Luckily, back when Nathan originally spliced his films, he had become aware that when he projected his prints there would always a bit of a jump at each edit point, so he had made most of his cuts with a bit of extra room, sometimes even resulting in some awkward moments where actors appeared to be waiting for the camera to start rolling. This was a Godsend for me, however, because it meant that I could trim down the edits and smooth out all the cuts without losing any crucial visual information or creating continuity or flow problems. It did, however, mean that I had to spend hours upon hours fixing every single one of the hundreds of edits in Nathan's films. But I felt this was crucial to making the image as watchable as possible, without the constant invasion of jumps and other visible anomalies to distract you.
Another problem the new film transfer posed was that, since Film to Tape transfer machines are not typically

LONG ISLAND CANNIBAL MASSACRE

corporate greed, which ultimately wins out in the end. It's all metaphor. The violence was never intended to be taken seriously.

John Smihula was amazing as the whacked-out hick grudge-fuelled-gardener - did he particularly enjoy the zany aspects of the role?

He was tremendous as Billy Buck! It's the single greatest performance in all of my films, and perhaps all cinema! He was snubbed at the Oscars for sure! Naturally, it's his favourite role. I don't know what happened but he just exploded as Billy Buck. It's as if Billy Buck were his alter ego. He was so into the part he almost ran straight off the roof in one scene! I was shooting and almost went into shock because he ran so near to the edge. He told me he was in complete control. And he was. Fred Borges was to be his partner and we even fitted him with makeup and wardrobe. I tremble to think what an incredible duo they would have been with Fred and his hunchback, crooked buck teeth and insane gesticulations. Ultimately he had to be replaced. Sometimes we miss heaven by a mere fraction of an inch.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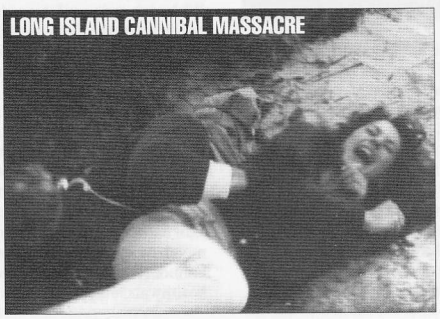

LONG ISLAND CANNIBAL MASSACRE

The gross-out mutilation of the female 'trespasser' was difficult to watch, especially with that insane music over the top, why did you linger on the carnage for so long?

It was intended to be symbolic of the deconstruction of the system, as it were. The only way to get to the source would be to completely disassemble the unit, and find out where it went wrong. Then rebuild it or toss it away! There were two versions for that scene. One with the music, and one with the voices. The one with the voices is the final version. It's as though the disembodied souls to the units are still going about there empty business, even though they're dead.

I liked the use of the newspaper headlines spinning into view throughout - did you make them yourself with Letraset, etc?

I had them printed in a shopping mall. But the actual filming... the twirling headlines I did alone. I put them on a spinning chair, shined a light only on the paper, stood on a step ladder, spun the chair with my foot, began shooting, zoomed in, stopped the chair with my foot, hit lap dissolve and repeated for the second headline! This is indicative of how impossibly low-budget these films were. Remember the chair had to stop with the paper facing right side up!

I spotted some eyeballs amongst the gore that looked suspiciously like lychees, am I right?

I didn't even know what they were! But you're right, they were lychees. I needed eyeballs and found, buried way back in a closet this large can filled with soft, white orbs. It said lychees. I just recently found out it's a fruit! I live a cloistered life!

Your butcher bill must have been colossal - exactly how much offal did you use during this production?

Actually, **LONG ISLAND CANNIBAL MASSACRE** utilized the most real meat. By the time I did **GRASS**, I had found other elements that could successfully pose as meat and flesh. I did use lots of actual meat in **GRASS**, and that girl who gets opened up was the most actual meat I've ever utilised in one scene. I think I even used an entire salami! I wonder, could I legitimately put a disclaimer at the end of my films that no animal was harmed during production? It kind of depresses me now that I think animals were slaughtered so they could star as human carnage, rather than star as your roast beef dinner. And I support PETA!

*The final shot of **GRASS** has the hicks 'conforming' and joining society - probably my favourite piece of the film - were you pleased with how it turned out?*

Very pleased. Though they weren't simply joining society, they were going to become the shrewd corporate shysters that would ruin peoples lives. But I wish we weren't so rushed to wrap the final scene. I had to use a lot of sloppy handheld camera shots because there was no time to put it on a tripod. And when Billy Buck & Jacob go to 'Metamorphosis Salon', the owners gave us permission to shoot inside. They were going to have their girls wash up and transform Billy Buck & Jacob! On the day we went to shoot, it was closed because it was a holiday. So I could only show them walking up to a locked door! It still works, though.

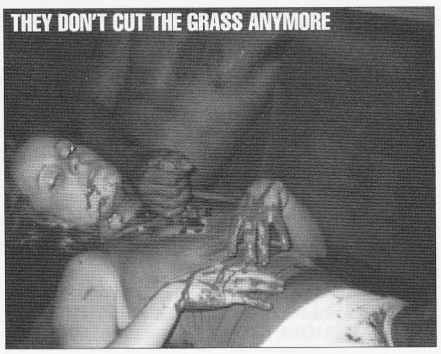
***VERMILION EYES** was to follow and is an incredibly strong look into the mind of a deranged individual - how happy are you with the finished film?*

VERMILION EYES was an experiment. I'd wanted to make that movie since I was a teenager. We made three pictures that were completely different from one another. So for the fourth, I decided to make a film bereft of any humor. I think it's the best of the four movies, but it's the most inaccessible.

Again you cast John Smihula as the lead, although he gives it his all, I felt he was more at home in the other three films - how do you rate his performance?

His performance was exactly what I wanted. Cold. Plain. Even dull. This was intentional because all of the conflict, all of the drama was taking place within. Like most people, he is us. Just another face in the crowd. What's behind any given face to me is what's so frightening.

*As this was made shortly after **HENRY - PORTRAIT OF A SERIAL KILLER**, was that film an influence on your own serial killer epic?*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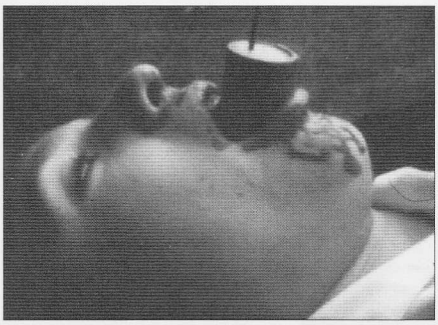


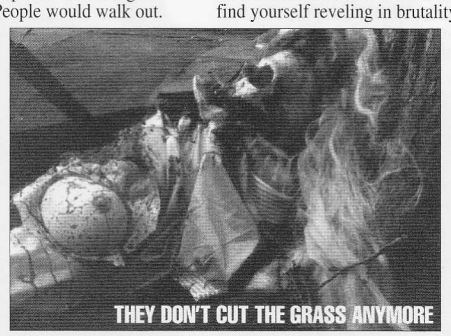
No. No movie was an influence. **VERMILION EYES** is anti-film. Anti-entertainment.

Two hours for a low-budget Super 8 production is a long film - do you feel it is too long, and how much more footage was there that you didn't use?

I can understand, certainly, that it can be considered too long, but that is essentially because of the low-budget, and the unrelenting dour tone throughout. Who is John Smihula? Why is the acting substandard? What's the point of this film and why is it so long? The first cut was three hours. I cut it down to 140 minutes. Currently, it"s just under two hours and I think this cut is the most accessible.

*Why is **VERMILION EYES** your least-seen film - what happened to it?*

When it was completed, I had some private screenings. These screenings were a disaster. People would walk out. When it was over, many people wouldn't talk to me. It was really weird. I felt like a murderer. Here I am with a big smile on my face, and this one girl looked like she was about to spit at me! Another woman ran out and her husband said; 'It's only a movie'. And she screamed out in front of everyone, 'No it isn't'! And ran out. I called John, who was in Arizona at the time, and I said, 'John, I think we made a terrible mistake! They don't just hate the movie, they hate US'! The last straw was when some woman called me a fascist, soulless misogynist. So I tucked my tail between my legs, took the film canisters and locked them in the closet.



The womb sequence was awesome - how did you film this?

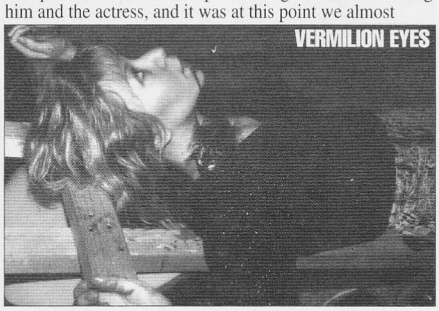
I had a prop doll, which I modified, added the umbilical and shot through a water filled tank. It was intended to intensify the surreal nature of the imagery.

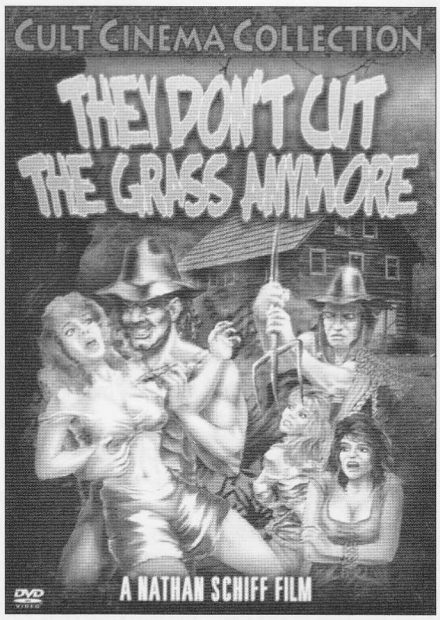
Did you devise the brilliant skinned-skull make-up for the finale?

Yes, It was a conglomeration of rubber, cotton, and lots of blood.

The beach mutilation segment has to be the nastiest grisly assault on celluloid - easily out-doing some of the hailed splatter classics from the Italians - did you ever get approached to help out on any other movies as a result?

No. **VERMILION EYES** has had very little exposure. That scene on the beach, the brutality took its toll on all of us in reality as well. The actress was truly suffering, covered in bloody sugar syrup and being eaten alive by mosquitoes. John was fed up and thought I was mistreating him and the actress, and it was at this point we almost





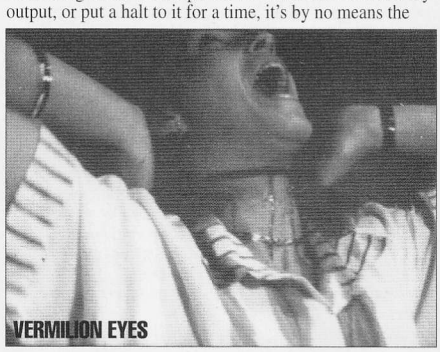
dissolved our friendship! This movie brought happiness to all, so it appears! However the following day, there we were, finishing the scene. The show must go on! Though admittedly, that sequence truly bothers me now. I don't look at it. It's indicative of real killing and real war. You find yourself reveling in brutality and destruction, then later you either admit having enjoyed it, or you are filled with self-loathing.

What was the shooting schedule for this film?

It took a long time to finish, like **LONG ISLAND CANNIBAL MASSACRE**. We started shooting in the summer of 1988, and completed filming in early winter of 1991. Since more film was accrued for **VERMILION EYES** than the other three features, it was by far the most expensive.

*Although slow in a few places, I found **VERMILION EYES** to be an amazing piece of work. Do you feel that because you depicted every vile act of abuse and death possible that you have said all you can say on the subject? Did the experience of making this film take its toll on you and is perhaps partly the reason you haven't made a film since 1990?*

Certainly not! There's always more stories to tell that might be violent in nature, but, and this is a mighty damn big but, I would never make another film like **VERMILION EYES**. The reason I stopped making films after **VERMILION EYES** was simply because I didn't want to make another feature on the same budgetary level as the four features that I did. I felt it was the end of an era. It was pointless to make another feature on Super 8, and I wouldn't go near videotape. So while it's slowed down my output, or put a halt to it for a time, it's by no means the



created to transfer sound, the audio we now had to work with sounded like it had been played through an old car radio. It was tinny, devoid of any low end, muffled and much of the dialogue was indecipherable. If we were to have used it, the resulting soundtrack would have been painfully difficult to listen to. So I decided we would have to use some of the sound elements from Nathan's old masters, and rent a projector to run his prints in my studio where I could digitise the original split tracks coming off the film directly into my Avid. The amazing headache this presented was, because Nathan's films had never been run on a synchronised projector (one truly running at the exact correct frame rate), all of these superior audio elements now ran at a different frame rate than the picture. This meant every single line of dialogue and all of the original sound effects in each film had to be re-synchronised to match the picture. We then discovered that a number of the original audio tracks Nathan had believed were completely split carried bleeds from the other track, meaning they were not useable and would also have to be replaced.

Another major challenge was the fact that I had to replace a great majority of the music and even a number of sound effects originally used in Nathan's films due to copyright issues. But because there was no money to pay for stock music or involve an audio engineer or composer in any capacity, Nathan instead searched his collection of public domain films and music and came to my studio with a suitcase full of VHS tapes and CDs. We then had to go through each film, scene by scene, to remove the offending music and sound effects, then search for and cobble together replacements. This was quite laborious as we frequently found ourselves running out of music we could use or get to work with a particular scene. And then of course the levels for all these audio elements had to be remixed. In the end, it was most gratifying to hear Nathan say he was much happier with the new soundtracks we created together than he was with the originals.

With **WEASELS RIP MY FLESH** we had an additional, potentially catastrophic problem with the original elements. It was the first feature Nathan made, and consequently he had shot it at 18fps rather than 24fps. When we reviewed the tape transfer, it became clear that the motion of the image was irregular and unnatural, jittery, for lack of a better term. It resembled what those "Accu-speed" versions of silent films like **NOSFERATU** come out looking like. Nathan was devastated, because this meant the film was most likely going to be rejected by Image. After consulting with the transfer technician and a few other post production professionals, I was told there was nothing we could do to solve this problem, that it was a natural by-product of a 18fps transfer. The night we learned this, I still remember how crushed Nathan was when he left my studio. I became determined to find a way to fix the problem so we could return to focusing on the rest of the work we had to do, and also to take a huge weight off both Nathan's and Robert's shoulders. I decided to try an experiment and took a small section of the tape transfer, then created a motion effect (essentially speeding up the film slightly) while telling my Avid software to interpolate the two video fields as it created these clips, which I hoped would smooth out the motion of the image without degrading the quality. The resulting clip was a great improvement, removing much of the undesirable herky-jerky quality. A video transfer of **WEASELS** will never look as natural as it would if it had been shot at 24fps, but I knew we now had an image presentable enough to be released and viewed with minimum distraction. It had been somewhat of a long gruelling day, but I knew Nathan really needed a pleasant surprise. So I stayed up the rest of the night, reconstructing the entire film (mercifully Nathan's shortest) so that the image was now virtually jitter-free and had been re-synchronised to the original dialogue and sound fx track (which ran at a different speed). When Nathan returned to my studio the following morning, it was great to watch his jaw drop when I showed him the good news. It also felt really good to know that now nothing would prevent **WEASELS** from being seen and appreciated.

There was no way we could fix all of the sound and image "imperfections" inherent in Nathan's films. Film scratches and audible camera noise on the dialogue track are just two examples of the many rogue qualities that remain untouched and intact. Most are the understandable by-products of making these movies on a non-existent budget and having only one edited print of each film for all this time. But the imperfections are an undeniable part of their authenticity, charm and improbable creation. One wouldn't want to alter them too much for fear of aesthetic contamination. It has been a truly gratifying experience to watch these films go from the murky, jumpy, old VHS masters Nathan himself had been forced to lend people for years, to the best possible digital reconstruction and remastering we could manage. In some ways, it's incredible that these remarkable cult time capsules have survived, and it's a minor miracle they are now being seen by such a wide audience. What Robert and I had hoped to do when we began discussing this project was create these DVDs from the best elements that will ever exist, and to somehow create the ultimate video presentation of Nathan's truly unique (and truly home-made) Super 8 feature films. I'm happy to say I believe we did everything we could to make that hope a reality.

Alan Bazin
Digital Shark Edit Studio
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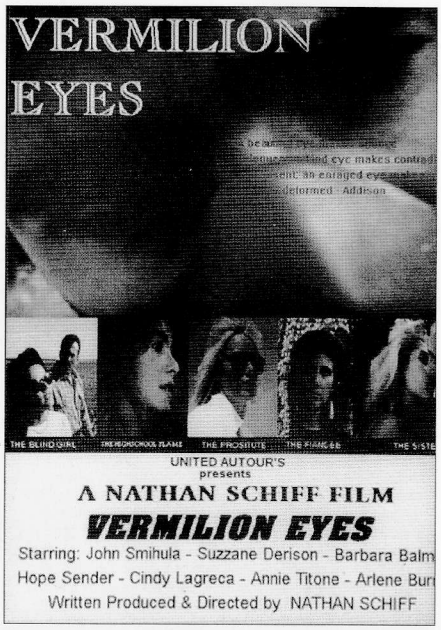

VERMILION
EYES
UNITED AUTOUR'S
presents
A NATHAN SCHIFF FILM
VERMILION EYES
Starring: John Smihula - Suzzane Derison - Barbara Balm
Hope Sender - Cindy Lagreca - Annie Titone - Arlene Bur
Written Produced & Directed by NATHAN SCHIFF

All illustrations this page: VERMILION EYES

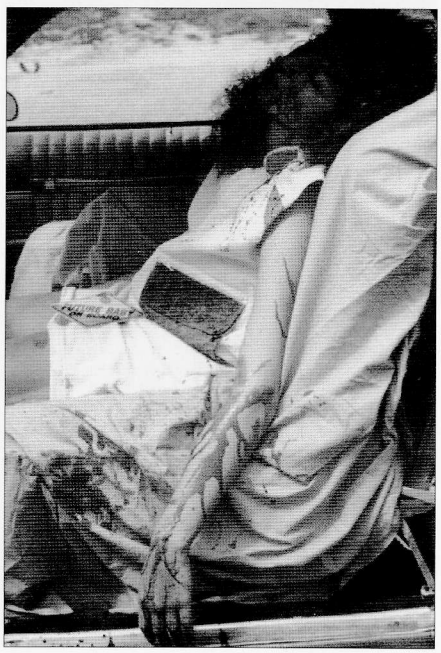
end. It's tough to make it in the business, and all of the things that I've done have been beyond the peripheries of what might be considered professional movie making. But therein lies the charm. They are pure, untainted by the system. I'm proud of them because I was able to create something under such daunting restrictions. The fact these films exist at all is truly a miracle in itself. They are like crippled children. They might not be able to walk, but you still love them!

I'm very happy that your films are finally reaching a wider audience with the Image DVD releases. How did this deal come about?

My friend, Robert Marcucci (the Production Designer on **STREET TRASH**), who loved the films, asked if I'd be interested in having them released on DVD. He knew people who also loved them, and they said, "Bring em on!" The rest is history. Robert even persuaded me to include my shorts. He has an eye for beauty! And super special thanks must go out to my post-production editor, Alan Bazin, probably the most talented, brilliant editor I've yet known, because not only is he technically adept, but he has an incredible grasp of the aesthetics of film. He has an incredible career ahead of him. With the team of Robert Marcucci & Alan Bazin, no one can fail! These films would not be on DVD without them.

Your movies are notorious for having borrowed soundtracks from many well-known films - how did you deal with this for the DVD releases?

Obviously they had to go. But now they have some replacement tracks that give the films their own identity.



With the soundtracks used in your original versions, you are obviously a film-buff at heart - how much research did you do to find the music to fit your visuals?

If you have a vision, and know what you want, it's so simple it's a crime. Music in film is such an integral part of the filmmaking process for me. If I weren't a film director, I'd be a composer of music. It's the ultimate high in creativity. I grew up taping movie music off television, and listening to classical music which has inspired movie music, and I would play it back and fantasise my own movie. That's really where the obsession all began.

*I take it that Image couldn't handle some of the taboo-breaking scenes and images in **VERMILION EYES** - is this likely to find another distributor?*

I hope so. It's frustrating that it can't be a part of the release, but **VERMILION EYES** has always been the unruly child! And homicidal to boot! So we'll see what the future holds.

*Speaking of the DVD releases - both **WEASELS** and **GRASS** have great pulp-style artwork - what happened with **CANNIBAL MASSACRE**?*

That's my fault. I was being rushed to get artwork in on time for the DVD covers, and I didn't know that artists charge a fortune to do full illustrations! Would you believe that one cover illustration would cost more than **WEASELS RIP MY FLESH**? No joke! I couldn't see myself paying more for a cover than I did on my features. So between looking for a reasonable price, and a competent artist, and the deadline, the cover to **LONG ISLAND CANNIBAL MASSACRE** suffered the cheapo route. I hate that cover! I wanted the old time pulp horror motif for all of them. Ironically, **VERMILION EYES** had a beautiful pulp horror illustration. So even getting attractive DVD covers became like it was making my

films! Hurry up! Not enough time or money! That's all you've got, too bad!

How did you get to know and work with John Smihula?

We were friends since high school. We met on the bus going home. All we would do is talk about movies. Movies. Movies. Movies. I had shot half of **WEASELS RIP MY FLESH** and needed to finish it. I asked John if he wanted to be in a movie. Naturally, he jumped, and the rest is history.

Are you still in touch with him and if so, what is he doing now - the same goes for other team players?

We're very close friends, like brothers. And like most close brothers, sometimes we want to kill each other! John is an English literature Professor at the University Of Reno, Nevada. He's also a filmmaker and has directed a controversial documentary on the School Of The Americas called **HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT**. It's about how this school trains young men to be assassins and murderers, who are sent to Latin America to commit untold atrocities, under the guise and support of the United States government. Martin Sheen narrates and it has received a slew of favorable reviews. Fred Borges has been island-hopping in the Philippines, satisfying his obsession with the Japanese and World War II. He's currently writing a novel on the subject entitled 'Islands Of Silence'. As for everyone else, most of the women are married with careers and children, so no, they are not chopped up and mutilated. Even the little girls at the conclusion of **LONG ISLAND CANNIBAL MASSACRE** are all married with children! John is divorced, Fred is married. Meanwhile I still can't find a girl who understands!

*Beneath all the flesh, blood and bone, your movies, especially **VERMILION EYES**, display many effective cinematic touches... these touches more than hint that you have a talent that goes far beyond the current crop of endless shot-on-video schlockers out there - so, what have you been doing over the past decade and when can we expect more from Nathan Schiff?*

I've worked seven years at a digital imaging company, and have traveled to Britain, Paris, Spain, Amsterdam, Israel. I saw the Greek Islands from the plane! Does that count? I've found people are alike all over, but it's a beautiful world. I'd like to go to Japan and see a **GODZILLA** movie in a theater! You see I have high goals! Thank you so much for at least seeing the merits inherent in my work. You know, when you've made movies on the level that I have, I used to believe they were beyond criticism. Nothing is beyond criticism. I have never tried to self-promote my movies because I thought they could stand alone on their own merits. I've noticed today many people pay to have positive things said about their work, which might be good for temporary business, but in the long run is unethical and is certain to fail. So I want to personally thank the creators at UNCUT for their belief in what I've done. And when the next surprise is unveiled, I hope it's as warmly received as my no-budget wonders.

Many thanks for your time and best wishes for the future.

Thank you Paul! It's been my pleasure all the way. Keep it uncut!

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